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SUBJECT: ROMANIA WITHDRAWS EU COMMISSIONER NOMINATION,
NAMES LEONARD ORBAN INSTEAD

REF: BUCHAREST 1644

Classified By: DCM MARK TAPLIN FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) & (D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Romanian senator and Liberal Party spokesperson Varujan Vosganian withdrew his nomination for European Commissioner amid allegations of links to the Communist-era Securitate and shady financial ties. The timing of the allegations lead many to speculate that this was politics Romanian-style being played out on the EU stage. Romania's next nominee was kept quiet until European Commission President Barroso announced his acceptance of Leonard Orban, the lead negotiator on Romania's EU accession. Orban appears to enjoy broad support, even from the opposition Social Democrats. He is a technocrat acceptable to all parties, and who is well known to Brussels. However, he has been awarded a relatively insignificant portfolio -- European Commissioner in charge of "multilingualism." End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) In an embarrassing turn of events, Romania withdrew its nomination for Varujan Vosganian as European Commissioner on October 28, after allegations surfaced regarding his financial connections to a reputedly corrupt businessman as well as his alleged past as an officer in the Securitate, the Communist secret police. Vosganian's request for Prime Minister Tariceanu to withdraw his candidacy followed talks in Brussels with European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso, who delayed confirmation of Romania's nomination. According to press reports, Barroso rejected the candidate on grounds that he lacked credentials -- he was unknown on the European level and never served within the Romanian government. Vosganian's unsuitability was confirmed when allegations surfaced that Vosganian had a hidden past as a Securitate collaborator and that his previous party, the Union of Democratic Forces (which merged with the Liberal Party), had been financed by Romanian businessman and media magnate Sorin Ovidiu Vantu, a wealthy speculator involved in the collapse of a major investment fund and a bank in 2000. Vosganian denied the allegations when announcing the withdrawal of his nomination, but said he did not want to tarnish Romania's image through lengthy confirmation hearings.

¶3. (C) The allegations against Vosganian appeared in the press on October 27, the same day the Democrats' Sorin Frunzaverde was sworn in as Minister of Defense, securing the key element of the Democratic Party's trade-off of the Defense Ministry slot in return for the Liberals nominating the EU Commissioner (reftel). The allegations surfaced in the leading daily Jurnalul National, when Liviu Turcu, a former Securitate officer who defected to the U.S. toward the end of the Ceausescu era, claimed that one of his subordinates recruited Vosganian in the 1980s.

¶4. (C) Following an October 29 meeting with President Basescu, PM Tariceanu forwarded--but did not announce--the

name of Romania's new nominee for European Commissioner to Brussels, Leonard Orban. Orban is a state secretary in the Ministry of European Integration and the brother of Ludovic Orban, the outspoken leader of the Liberals' Bucharest branch and vice mayor of Bucharest. Barroso subsequently announced October 30 that Leonard Orban would be the European Commissioner in charge of multilingualism. One Liberal Senator commented to poloff that due to the fiasco caused by the poor quality of the Prime Minister's first choice, Barroso dictated Romania's second choice of Orban as someone whom Brussels could accept.

15. (C) Social Democratic Party Deputy Viorel Hrebenciuc told poloff October 30 that Orban had broad support as a technocrat, and was well known in Brussels for his role as negotiator for EU accession under both this coalition government and the previous Social Democratic government. Hrebenciuc described Orban as a liberal, but not beholden to the Liberal Party, unlike his brother who is a vociferous critic of Basescu. Hrebenciuc also described Vosganian as a poor choice, who was selected on the basis that he had nearly missed out on other senior positions in the Liberal Party. Others in Bucharest political circles have even pointed the finger at Washington for having masterminded Vosganian's demise, citing the fact that whistleblower Turcu, a former defector, continues to reside in the U.S.

16. (C) Bio note: Leonard Orban is the Romanian nominee for European Commissioner. He is a state secretary in the Ministry of European Integration who had a key role in accession negotiations, serving as deputy chief negotiator from May 2001 to December 2004, and then chief negotiator until April 2005. He has been involved in EU issues since 1993, when he became a parliamentary counselor for European

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affairs. He graduated in 1992 from the Economics Academy in Bucharest and from the Mechanics Faculty in Brasov in 1986. Besides Romanian, he speaks English and French fluently, and has moderate Italian language skills. He was awarded with the Knight of the Star of Romania National Order in 2002 for his contribution to Romania's Euro-Atlantic integration. He was born on 28 June 1961 in Brasov, Romania. He is married and has one child. The European Delegation political counselor Onno Simons described Orban as nice, competent, balanced, good mannered. He commented that Orban does not have the Romanian tendency of talking a lot without saying anything. All describe Orban as a compliant, non-political personality who was a placeholder till 2009 when Romania would nominate its next European Commissioner.

17. (C) Comment: The political theatre and plot twists behind Romania's nomination of European Commissioner is probably a harbinger of how Romanian politics will be played out on the Brussels stage. The fact that the allegations against Tariceanu ally Vosganian surfaced immediately after Basescu's choice for Minister of Defense was sworn in led many commentators to look for the political hand at work. In fact, the truth may have been still more complex than the continuing struggle between the two seats of power in the Romanian government. In the end, Brussels will find the choice of Leonard Orban, a technocrat rather than a politician, reassuring if not inspiring. End Comment.
Taubman